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ABSTRACT

Clara De Coteau, a Chippewa woman who was born in 1909, wrote the story of her first 18 years of life for this unit. In the story, Mrs. De Coteau tells of many experiences which girls can relate to their life today. While some things have changed, other things have not. Mrs. De Coteau illustrates very well the patience, time and effort it takes to excel in something. Her frequent reference to her music is a good example of this. In her story, she often relates to her extended family. A discussion of this relationship should help the girls understand their family system. There is a list of questions that can be used to help the girls discuss the story. As a follow-up to the story, girls may talk to other women about their growing up years. The unit consists of the booklet, "Growing Up To Be A Woman," which is for all age groups. (Author/CM)

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RC 012461

Growing Up To Be A Woman

Clara De Coteau

Illustrated by Toni Thayer

Choices & Careers
Free To Choose

Wisconsin Tribal Women Inc.

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Growing Up To Be A Woman

by Clara De Coteau

Illustrated by Toni Thayer

About The Author

Clara De Coteau worked for many years for the Bureau of Indian Affairs. Recently, she has worked as a medical records librarian. She is active in church and community affairs, and plays the organ for her church. She especially likes to take part in pow-wows. Toni Thayer, a Winnebago, did the illustrations.

1978

About The Program

"Growing Up to Be a Woman" has been developed as part of the project, Choices & Careers, Free to Choose, a career development project for tribal girls. The project was developed with the assistance of tribal women in Wisconsin and was funded with special needs funds from Extension Service-USDA.

W3GX9

Fact Sheet

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Growing Up To Be A Woman—Unit for Girls

Choices & Careers
Free To Choose

Clara De Coteau, a Chippewa woman who was born in 1909, wrote the story of her first 18 years of life for this unit. In the story Mrs. De Coteau tells of many experiences. Girls can relate these experiences to their life today. While some things have changed, other things have not.

Mrs. De Coteau illustrates very well the patience, time, and effort it takes to excel in something. Her frequent reference to her music is a good example of this. In her story she often relates to her extended family. A discussion of this relationship should help the girls understand their family system.

You can have the girls read the story before the session or at the session. In the girls' materials there is a list of questions that can be used to help them discuss the story.

As a follow-up to the story, girls may want to talk to other women about their growing up years.

The unit consists of the booklet, Growing Up To Be A Woman, (W3GX9), which is for all age groups.

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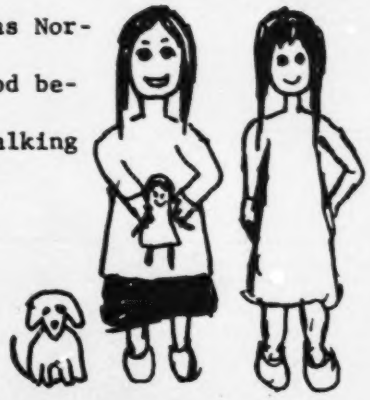
Growing Up To Be A Woman

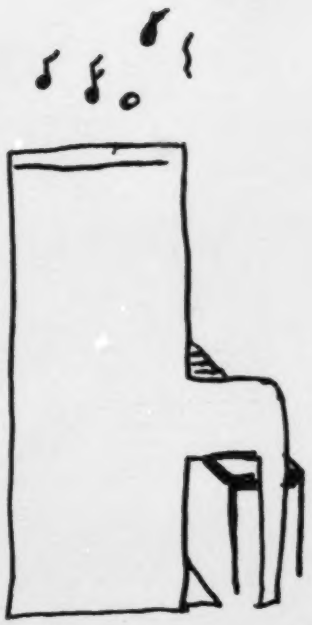
According to my birth certificate, I was born April 13, 1909, on the Bad River Reservation (Odanah), Wisconsin. My father was a fullblood Chippewa and my mother a fullblood Norwegian. Our household consisted of my father, mother, my half-sister, Mary, who was Norwegian, and our dog, Snyder, who I understand stood between me in my buggy and whoever happened to be talking to my mother. Our home was on the property of my father's uncle, Chief James Blackbird.



For a while, my father was a policeman in Odanah. I was told he had been shot while doing his duty, but the bullet was recovered and so did he. I have a recollection of my sister carrying me to our first gate to meet my father at one time. This must have been in my second year. Also, during my second year, my father worked for his uncle during the haying season. It was during this season that my father fell off the hayrack and broke his back. Of course, in those days no one knew how to treat a broken back as they do now. So my father just had to lie in bed until the end came, which was in October, 1911. I faintly remember someone holding me on her lap watching my father in bed. Before my father passed away, both of his sisters promised him that they would help take care of me. And they certainly did. Around them I was never in want even though I did not ask for anything.

MUSIC

When I learned how to walk, that was when, I learned how to dance—Indian style. I would go and visit one of my aunts, and she would sing and beat out the rhythm on her knee, and I would have to dance in front of her. Today, when I hear a drum, I can't keep my feet still.



My sister Mary was the organist at the Methodist Church at Odanah. I remember the choir had a party at our house and I came down our stairs (I was supposed to be in bed upstairs) and peeked at them for a while. Does anyone remember the game "Heavy, heavy hangs over thy head"? That's what they were playing. About the organ-it was one of those old-time pump organs. That's the kind I first learned how to play.

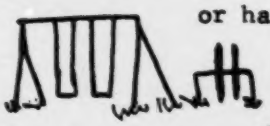
When I was six years old, we traded our organ in for a piano. That meant I had to take piano lessons. My first lessons were from Sister Delphine of St. Mary's Convent in Odanah. Then later I took lessons from Grace Fountain who played the piano at our movie theater. Oh yes, we had <u>two</u> movie theaters in those days. At the theater where Grace played, there was an orchestra playing while the movie was on. We kids would probably stay seated for the first two reels, and then we would go out between reels to get a bag of popcorn. Then, at the end of the next reel, we would go out and get a bottle of pop. Then, at the end of the following reel, we would have to <u>go out</u>.

STARTING TO GROW UP

After I started going to school, my granduncle would tell me about every day "kego awassa ijaken" and "gi we shkwa kikinoamading." That was "don't go far" and "go home after school." I guess that went in one ear and out the other. When my mother got through milking the cows, she would come and find me either at the Bentleys' or at Pansie's house. Sometimes I would be at my cousin Dollie's house where we would wonder who was going to eat from the little "fat plate."

My mother would read the funny papers to me every night. She used to be so glad when Saturday came around at which time a new edition of the Sunday paper would come out. That was the Chicago Herald and Examiner.

I remember my first participation at our church Christmas program. I would have to practice "saying my piece" at home with my sister helping me. To get me used to being in front of the people, I had to stand on a chair and say my piece for my mother and sister. Came the night of the program. I was in a dialogue. When it came my turn to speak, I must have frozen or had stage fright. I didn't utter a sound. Do you want to know what my "piece" was? It was "I have a little stove so high to bake my doll a Christmas pie." Enough of that.



My sister married a full-blood from Odanah and they went to live in Duluth where he found a job. I certainly missed her.

My eighth birthday was spent at the sugar bush. This was my first experience at the sugar bush. One of my aunts brought a birthday cake. I remember I ate too much of the sugar when it was thick and "syruppy"—just before it turned to sugar and I got sort of sick.

MOVING TO DULUTH

That fall, my mother received a letter from my sister in Duluth asking her to come to Duluth as she was expecting a baby some time in the spring. So we found a couple who rented our house, packed our suitcases, and went on the train to Duluth where my sister's husband met us at the depot. My sister and her husband had an apartment on West Third Street across the street from Washington School—before it became a junior high

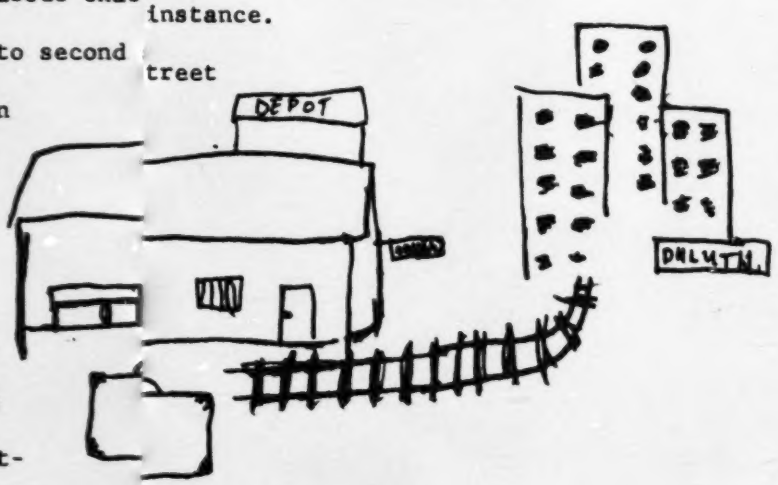
school. I entered the third grade
remember one little negro boy help
That's all I can recall about that

Then we moved down to second
and I entered the Jackson
School. There is one
thing I remember about
this school. As soon
as we came to school, we
had to do our arithmetic
problems. They were writ-
ten on the blackboard. Sometimes

Then we found a bigger apartm
and I was enrolled in the Emerson
well settled. I don't know who lo
taking lessons from her. My study
had our piano moved from Odanah.
hour and was excused for some of t
class. I walked to and from the l
acquainted with the kids in the ne
right at home with the rest of the
1917-1918 came and went.

Then May 1918. On a particul
get up rather early. She sent me
wanted. That was 7:30 A.M. I kin
busy that morning. So I walked do
It was too early for the stores to

Everything was so new to me. I
d me with something about my lessons.
instance.
treet



e did not finish them.
nt, or flat, on eleventh avenue west
chool. Well, I guess we were pretty
ated the piano teacher, but soon I was
book was Matthews Grade II. Oh yes, we
would take my lesson during the noon
e time in the first period afternoon
ssons. By this time, I was getting
ghborhood, which was Italian. I felt
brown-skinned kids. The winter of

r Saturday morning, my mother had me
owntown with some money to get what I
of thought the household was rather
ntown, and looked in all the windows.
open. After the stores opened, of

course I went to Woolworth's and got myself a doll. I must have been downtown for about three hours. When I returned to the flat, as soon as I opened the door, I heard a baby crying. So I went into the kitchen and there my mother was taking care of a baby. So, I thought that's why I was hurried out of the place so early in the morning. My sister had a baby boy.

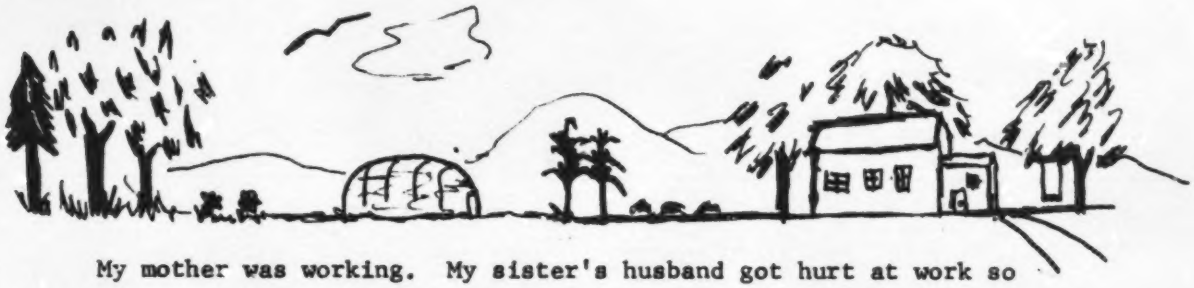
In that neighborhood I became acquainted with a Swedish girl, Judy, and we went through grade and high school together. I also became friendly with an English family, and I still keep in contact with those of them who are still living.

We located a larger flat about two blocks away, so we moved there. It was still in the Italian neighborhood. We were one block from the Italian Catholic Church. At their weddings, they would toss out filled hard candy as they came out of the church. I was right there with the rest of the kids picking up the candy. I joined the kids in their games. One of the boys (not Italian) called me a "hard-boiled Wop." The Italian people observed all the Saints' feast days. On Sunday afternoon of the Feast Day, they would have a festival in the church yard. People would have concessions—pop, ice cream and hot dogs. The Italian band, Sons of Italy, provided the music. I enjoyed myself with them.

SUMMERTIME

Most of the summer vacations I would spend in Odanah with my aunt and uncle, the Mitchells. Of course, I would also visit my other aunt and uncle, the Coutures. There was always an Indian dance or two during the summer, especially on the Fourth of July. It seemed I went to a movie almost every night. My cousin Antoine used to give me a dime for the movie. First, he would ask me to start a fire in the kitchen stove at his home.

He knew very well I could not do this but he was just teasing me. You see, I was trained to be afraid of matches. In fact, I was 12 years old before I ever lit a match and that was when I lit a sparkler on the Fourth of July.



My mother was working. My sister's husband got hurt at work so he had to stay home for quite a while. His leg never got better. So he wanted to come back to Odanah and stay at the home of his aunt, Mrs. Manypenny. I remember it was towards the last of May when he passed away. When we all returned to Duluth, we had to pick up the pieces, so to speak. My sister got a job.

I eventually changed piano teachers. The new teacher was a Frenchman, Mr. Louis LaSalle. When I would go for a lesson, he would call me "Miss Blackberry." I took lessons from him for about two years.

During the summers, different evangelists would hold services some place in the West End. So I would get on the streetcar and go to the children's services in the afternoon. One time they didn't have any one to play the piano for the songs, so I played. I was brave. This was towards the end of the summer after my return from Odanah.

One summer while in Odanah, I got word that my maternal grandmother had died. She had lived in Rice Lake, Wis. So my aunt went there with me for the funeral, and my mother and sister with her little boy came from Duluth to Rice Lake. I remember that I cried and cried at my grandmother's funeral. Before we left Odanah, my aunt told me to go over and tell my granduncle, the Chief, that Grandma Christiansen had died. So I told him

this in the Chippewa language. My aunt had told me what to say. We were going to get off the train at Odanah after the funeral, but my uncle was there at the depot telling us to stay on the train. He said that we were to go right through to L'Anse, Mich., to attend his brother's funeral. We had to change trains at Saxon, so my aunt and uncle bought me some fresh clothes. It was either that fall or the following fall that my granduncle died.

MORE MUSIC

My sister noticed in the paper that one of the music schools in Duluth was having a special summer course, so she and my mother had me enrolled there for this course. That was one summer I stayed in Duluth.

In August at the end of the course, I found out that I was one of the lucky students who had made the most progress during the summer, so I was awarded free lessons for the coming school year. It seemed that I did not have the "right technique," so I had to start all over learning how to play—even though at 12 years of age I could play "Poet and Peasant" and "overture to Raymond." I had to take certain finger exercises and learn the correct hand position. I had my picture in the paper along with the rest of the lucky ones. Wah! During the following school year, I had to pay for only the music. So I kept on taking piano lessons until I finished high school. I even received credit in high school for these piano lessons. I had to take examinations twice a year after studying certain lessons in technique and, of course, some of Bach.

There was at one time a group of our Odanah people dancing in Billings Park in Superior. So, after school, I would pack my little red suitcase with my Indian outfit, hop on the streetcar and go to Billings Park. When

the dancing was over for the evening, some of the dancers would walk with me to the streetcar making sure that I was all right.

Going back to my school chum, Judy: She learned to play the accordian. She would come over to our house and she would play all Swedish numbers—polkas, waltzes, etc.,—and I would chord on the piano. At one of the basketball games at Central High, we played during the half. We thought we were "hot stuff." It seemed I wanted to do everything she did. She cut her long hair, so I asked my mother if I could have my hair cut. My friend bought one of the "Boston Bags"—remember them?—to carry school books in, so I had to buy one. One thing was different—she learned how to two-step, and I didn't.

OFF TO HASKELL

In June 1927, I graduated from Central High School, Duluth. In one week exactly, I was flat on my back in the hospital with my appendix out. While in the hospital, I received a letter from my cousin, Dollie, saying she had enrolled at Haskell for the following year. Of course, there was nothing to do but for me to make application for Haskell also. I was accepted. After discharge from the hospital, I had to take it easy for a while. In the meantime, in a letter from Odanah, I found out that one of my aunts, Mrs. Couture, was sick, so I thought I would go there when I was able and help take care of her. She was the one who would have me dance for her and she always talked to me in the Chippewa language. When I was able to travel, I went to Odanah. When I got off the train, two of the Bentley girls met me. I told them why I was there. They told me that my aunt had passed away that day. I felt so bad. I wanted to help in any way I could.

There were five of us girls from Odanah, who traveled to Haskell Institute, Lawrence, Kansas. We had so much fun on the train. When we

were in Kansas for a couple of days, we certainly felt the heat. There are just two of us left—my cousin Dollie and I. I wanted to start all over in the business course, but since I already had some business training in high school, the business teacher put me in the senior class. I felt I was not ready for this. But I guess I had to take it. I'll never forget our accounting teacher. She called us by our last names. One time Flora Bluejacket and I were talking in class (she sat ahead of me), so our teacher came over to us and said, "All right, Blackjacket and Bluebird." She really emphasized our names. My maiden name was Blackbird.

At that time at Haskell, everything was done in military style. We lined up in companies at roll time with captains and corporals and lieutenants for each company. We got up by the bugle. We slept on the sleeping porch. I remember one time Dollie and I overslept. We looked at each other and said that it seemed awfully quiet. I guess we realized that we had overslept. And did we make tracks for line-up! Of course, we got a demerit. A demerit was five points—each point to be worked off by working in the dining room after meals and waxing the first floor in

the girls' building or working for the matron. Ugh! One would think we would be excused, since we were newcomers. No! We marched to the dining room and back, two by two, and then we were dismissed. In the dining room, the girls sat on one side and the boys at the other side. I got fat on "government gravy." That gravy bowl was on the table for all three meals. I think the syrup was always on the table too. We had butter on Thanksgiving and Christmas. We were fitted for uniforms. The girls wore middy blouses and skirts together with capes and caps of an overseas style. On Sundays, there was what was called a "social." This was in the afternoon when the girls and boys could walk around together in the middle of the campus within sight of the matrons. Then there were club parties in the school building. Most of us had a "pleasant"—someone we liked (male).

I remember the times I would take out sandwiches from the dining room and hide them under my coat. The sandwiches were made from almost any kind of food from the table—beans, syrup, etc. I even carried out a bowl of pudding under my coat! Ask Dollie about this. We had "town days" every other Saturday. Of course, it would never do to have the boys and girls in downtown Lawrence on the same Saturday. We were all required to go to church on Sunday. We had a very good Thanksgiving dinner. And do you know, I took out a lot of food so that we could have a midnight lunch. I packed it in my little red suitcase and hid it in our clothes closet. Some of us fixed our beds to look as if we were in them and came back to our room and sat on the floor in the clothes closet and were very quiet. We hardly breathed. But we had a lunch and sneaked out to the sleeping porch.

In January, there seemed to be a siege of the mumps. First, Dollie woke up one Saturday morning with a sore throat so she had to go to the

hospital for examination. Sh stayed there. She had the mumps on one side. Since we slept togethe , I realized that probably I would be making a trip to the hospital also. Sure enough. On the following Monday morning I went to the hospital. had the mumps on both sides.

I took part in the music l programs. I was in a double trio and even went to Topeka to be on program. Of course, our music teacher made the arrangements. I too piano lessons there also and I was in the choir and glee club. The com encement service was held outdoors in the stadium. Our music director played second piano and I played first piano for the choir numbers.

I remember I tried to cu my own hair. First, I would trim one side, and then the other side would seem too long so I cut more on that side until my hair was just about o the top of my ears. I had to stop cutting. Then I curled my hair. You c n imagine what I looked like.

OF TO WORK

Came the time when all o us, or most of us, were leaving Haskell for our homes. I remember as I w s getting into the car going to the depot, the girls were out on the law singing, "Bye, Bye, Blackbird." I really enjoyed my year at H.I. I we t back home to Duluth to wait word that I had received a civil service ppointment in the Indian Service (called BIA now). Each commercial se ior student took a civil service examination for the final. I reported on my first job on December 1, 1928, at the Colville Indian Agency, Nespe em, Washington. I got off the train at Almira, Washington, and went o the hotel and had lunch. In the early afternoon, I got on the mail stage" which took me to the agency. The name "stage" reminds one of a western movie, doesn't it? They even called the buses on the highway "sta es."

The state of Washington s a long ways from Minnesota where I lived.

Of course, I got lonesome at times. But I had a job to do to earn a living, so I had to stay there and work. One thing that helped—I was among Indian people—and I even took part in their dances.

June 1975

Activity Section

THINKING ABOUT
CLARA BLACKBIRD DE COTEAU

1. In her story Mrs. De Coteau tells of several times when she needed to be brave and courageous. What were some of those times? What does it take to be brave and courageous? How does one avoid being afraid?
2. In her story Mrs. De Coteau tells about her making friends with several ethnic groups. How did she do this? How can you do this? Do you want to? Why or why not?
3. Mrs. De Coteau had many people in her family besides her parents who did things with her as she grew up. What were some of those things? With what people in your family do you do things?
4. Mrs. De Coteau's story really describes the kinship system and the extended family which many Indian people have. What are some examples of this kinship system in her life? What are some examples of the kinship system in your life?
5. Even though Mrs. De Coteau did many different kinds of things in her first 18 years of life, what things did she do that were particularly Indian? How did those things help her in getting along with others?
6. Mrs. De Coteau is a very good musician today. How did she get to be a good musician? What characteristics does it take to get to be really good at something?
7. What kinds of things did Mrs. De Coteau do for fun or recreation? What kinds of things do you do for fun? How are they like, or different from, the things Mrs. De Coteau did?
8. Mrs. De Coteau forgot her piece for the Christmas program. How do you cope with your feelings when you fail at something? Do you say I'll never do it again, or do you try again?

9. What did you think about her story of being sent shopping when her nephew was born? How are things different today?
10. Mrs. De Coteau tells about being called a "hard boiled wop." How do you cope with name calling?
11. How did death and illness affect Mrs. De Coteau's growing-up years? How do these things affect young people's lives today? Why is there a difference?
12. Mrs. De Coteau described many "troubles" in her first 18 years of life. How do you think she coped with such troubles? How do you cope with trouble?
13. How much thought do you suppose Mrs. De Coteau gave to her career? How many choices do you think she had? How many choices do you have?
14. How were Mrs. De Coteau's school days different from yours? How do you think she felt about going to school so far away?
15. What did you think of her story about her Thanksgiving Day lunch? Have you ever done anything like this?
16. What experiments, similar to Mrs. De Coteau's cutting her hai , have you done in an attempt to improve yourself? Why do girls do such things?
17. How do you think Mrs. De Coteau learned to be independent at Haskell?
18. Mrs. De Coteau moved to many different places in her childhood. What do you think she did to have friends and fun wherever she went?
19. Ask your mother, or aunt or grandmother, to tell you about her life when she was growing up. Write her life story for yourself. Maybe you will want to share part of the story with other girls in your group.